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ABSTRACT

This brief retrospective outlines major points in the history of American Indian education and major issues in Indian curriculum and teacher training. From the arrival of Europeans until recent times, formal schooling for American Indians has been controlled by others--first missionaries, then the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). After World War II, American Indians began to actively promote self-determination and their own civil rights. Today all Indian schools are controlled by the local community or are operated by the BIA in conjunction with local Indian school boards. American Indian students' generally poor academic achievement has been attributed to sociocultural factors, such as differences between students' and teachers' languages, cultures, values, and learning styles. School improvement efforts either are based on studies of urban or suburban schools serving the dominant culture or follow the "whole language approach," focusing on getting students to read more "real literature" and to write more. Integration of American Indian language and culture into the regular school curriculum is critical to improving student achievement. Teachers of Indian children need systematic training about sociocultural influences on learning and about tribal cultures. Some tribal councils have formulated educational policies that mandate school instruction in the tribal language and culture. This digest contains 10 references. (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools April 1989

Changes in American Indian Education: A Historical Retrospective for Educators in the United States

Digest EDO-RC-89-1

THE BRIEF RETROSPECTIVE in this Digest should interest all American educators concerned with such enduring issues as equity and equality of educational opportunity, local autonomy, community involvement, curriculum development, and the relationship of cultural values to the way schooling is conducted in general. American Indian educators face challenges and are devising solutions to unique cultural and pedagogical problems. The discussion that follows aims to help all educators become more knowledgeable about the contributions of and circumstances surrounding the education of American Indians.

Historical overview

Schooling as a formal institution for Indians started with missionaries, and teachers in missionary schools were at least as interested in salvation as in education. According to many observers, the regimen of the schools usually included getting Indians to dress, speak, and act like white people (see for example, Whiteman, 1986).

Church-operated schools, of course, were also common for white people during the early years of the United States. Whereas many of these church schools were replaced in the nineteenth century by locally-funded and locally-controlled public schools, mission schools for American Indian students were largely replaced by schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). These schools were administered directly from the nation's capital. At that time Indians were not U.S. citizens, and they lacked the right to control their own lives and the education of their children (Eder & Reyhner, 1988; Whiteman, 1986).

Indian Commissioner Thomas J. Morgan wrote in 1889 that "the Indians must conform 'to the white man's ways,' peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must." Many Indians began their education at this time in boarding schools, often far from home, where they had their hair cut, where their native clothes were replaced, and where they were often punished for speaking their own languages (Whiteman, 1986).

Official government policy encouraged detribalizing Indians partly through education and partly through allotting Indian communal lands (Eder & Reyhner, 1988; Whiteman, 1986). Moreover, many citizens regarded Indians as "Vanishing Americans," and it was commonplace for newspapers to advocate the virtual extermination of American Indians (Murphy & Murphy, 1989).

Such policies and attitudes did not reflect the needs of Indian people, as more and more non-Indians began to realize in the early twentieth century (for example, Meriam, 1928).

After the First World War Indians received citizenship, and during the New Deal tribes assumed greater responsibility for their own governance, more Indian heritage was taught in BIA schools, and some boarding schools were replaced by local day schools.

From a population low of about 237,000 in 1900, the American Indian population grew to 1.5 million in 1980, and increasing numbers of Indian children began to attend public schools. Today two-thirds of all Indian children who live on reservations attend public schools (Eder & Reyhner, 1988).

Civil rights and self-determination

After the Second World War, along with Blacks and other minorities, American Indians began actively to promote self-determination and their own civil rights generally. This development has affected Indian education profoundly. The 1972 Indian Education Act funded supplementary programs to help American Indian students both on and off reservations. In so doing, it recognized that 50% of all Indians lived in urban areas and 75% lived off reservations.

President Nixon in his 1970 message to Congress declared a new era of Indian self-determination, and in 1975 Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.

Today, 56 community-controlled schools operate under contract from the BIA. In addition, 20 tribally-controlled community colleges have been started. The 103 elementary and secondary schools still operated directly by the BIA now have local Indian school boards with a voice in the operation of the school, including the selection of staff.

Indian curriculum

Locally controlled, BIA-operated, and public schools have all sought to hire more Indian teachers and administrators and to engage in local curriculum development. A few schools now provide initial reading instruction in tribal languages. Many teach English as a second language, and most schools that serve Indian children teach some tribal history and culture. Like other schools, these schools also teach English and basic skills .

The Indian Education Act of 1972, together with federal bilingual programs, which became available to Indian schools in 1978, have helped this process, though some observers believe their supplementary nature sometimes makes it difficult to integrate Indian language and culture into the regular school curriculum.

Educators are also searching for ways to improve the poor student achievement that has been documented in all the major studies of Indian education (for example, Fuchs & Havighurst, 1972/1983; Meriam, 1928). Gilliland (1986) lists eight sociocultural factors as potentially responsible for the poor academic achievement of Indian students:

- differences between native culture and school culture,
- ignorance of native culture among school staff,
- differences between students' and teachers' values,
- differences in native students' learning styles,
- poor motivation of Indian students,

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- language differences of students and teachers,
- students' home and community problems, and
- inappropriate use of tests with Indian students.

School improvement efforts in Indian schools entail two approaches. One approach applies school effectiveness findings, based largely on urban and suburban studies carried out in schools serving the dominant culture. Another approach focuses on getting students to read more "real literature" and getting them to write more. Most of the experimentation in Indian schools applies the second approach, known loosely as the "whole language approach." This approach has a varied ancestry, with roots in progressive education, the open classroom movement, and in language experience techniques.

For the primary grades, the ERIC/CRESS publication *Just Beyond Your Fingertips: American Indian Children Participating in Language Development* (Boloz, Hickman, & Loughrin, 1987) is a good example of a whole language approach based on English texts and activities.

The amount of American Indian literature that can be integrated into language arts, social studies, and other subjects continues to grow steadily (Stensland, 1979). Nonetheless, some observers view the typical use of commercial textbooks in American schools as an impediment to the integration of American Indian studies in the curriculum of Indian schools. Coordinated nationwide effort to produce curriculum for Indian students does not exist.

Teacher training

Fuchs and Havighurst (1972/1983) found that teachers of Indian children needed systematic training to help them take account of the sociocultural processes operating in Indian communities and classrooms. Current research on cultural learning styles (for example, Rhodes, 1989; Swisher & Deyle, 1987) confirms the importance of this suggestion. This research demonstrates, for example, that American Indians respond well to cooperative learning and peer tutoring. Indian community leaders also favor teaching students about their tribal culture (Fuchs & Havighurst, 1972/1983). Hence, teachers should learn about American Indians in general and particularly about the tribe within which they will teach.

Such recommendations highlight the importance of recruiting teachers from among members of the Indian community. It is usually easier to teach a tribal member the standard teacher training than it is to teach an outsider the tribal language and culture (Eder & Reyhner, 1988). Standardized tests recently required for entrance to and exit from teacher training programs, however, make it increasingly difficult for American Indians and other minorities to obtain teacher certification.

Tribal policies

In the past few years tribal councils pursuing self-determination have been expanding their roles and adopting educational policies. These policies have tended to express a strong commitment to educational excellence and tribal languages and cultures. For example, the Navajo tribal educational policies of 1985 declared that the Navajo language was an essential element of the life, culture, and identify of the tribe and mandated school instruction in both Navajo and English.

Looking to the future

The challenge to develop appropriate instructional methods and materials for American Indian students will doubtless continue to occupy educators' attention in the coming years. Schools with American Indian children need more teachers and administrators who understand Indian communities, especially their cultural and linguistic background. Fewer than twenty years, however, have past since President Nixon endorsed a federal policy of self-determination for American Indians, and much remains to be done.

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